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The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America

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book is studded with excellent descriptions of such key characters as J. S. Woodsworth, William Aberhart, and Peter Lougheed.

If any serious criticism should be leveled against Friesen's book, it relates to balance. The pre-1900 period receives detailed attention, while more recent periods are less well covered. Nonetheless, *The Canadian Prairies* is highly successful and is already widely used in all parts of Canada. The book should be of substantial interest to students of the western portions of the United States. The "medicine line," as nineteenth-century Indians described the Forty-ninth parallel, is a thoroughly arbitrary boundary that imposes different political and constitutional jurisdictions on adjacent territories that are similar in geography and population. Different societies evolved on the two sides of "the line," as the border is often called in the contemporary West. It is fascinating to study these societies in a comparative way. Gerald Friesen's book makes such study much easier and substantially more enjoyable than was hitherto the case.

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DONALD SWAINSON

The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America, by Robert G. Athearn. Foreword by Elliot West. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986. xii, 319 pp. Illustrations, map, essays on sources, index. \$25.00 cloth.

The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America is a posthumous book. Robert G. Athearn died in 1983; Elliot West, in concert with some of Athearn's family and friends, as well as the staff of the University Press of Kansas, completed the manuscript and shepherded it through the publishing process. Withal, West claims in a maudlin foreword, it "is still Robert Athearn's book alone" (xi). That is not true: West wrote one chapter and amended others; somebody else selected the photographs; and so forth. Still, the circumstances are sufficient to mute criticism, amplify praise, and cause reviewers to fret over their verb tenses.

Although Athearn observed that his subject "has no state boundaries, because they are artificial anyway" (9), his widow and Professor West nevertheless succeeded in inflicting them upon the study by limning an "authentic West" (xii) that nowadays begins at Sioux City and ends at the western borders of Idaho, Nevada, and Arizona. The authenticity of the region—in contrast to the pretentiousness of the Midwest and the anomalousness of the Far West (the former tried hard to be part of the real thing, said Athearn, while the latter simply became eastern)—derives largely from the fact that it was the last-settled

and most colorful territory beyond the Mississippi. The book, then, concerns the Mountain West and how it came to represent a generic, imagerial West once the nineteenth century (when colorful stuff abounded) became the twentieth (when colorful stuff was in short supply).

After twenty or so pages of justification, apology, and memoir, Athearn got down to brass tacks, and, beginning with chapter two, produced quite a remarkable account of the modern West, how it developed, what the people who lived there thought about it, what non-westerners thought about it, and how it has become, in our time, a necessary fiction. Consider the principal episodes: First, at the end of the nineteenth century, farmers plowed up the old cow country; corporate farming eroded the perceived western quality of individualism (or maybe it appeared to erode the perception, since that is all there was); but myths of western virtue persisted and sustained the nation against the perplexities of World War I. In the 1920s, folks got the notion that the West could be maintained as some kind of museum piece, suggestive of something important to our heritage; but American culture barged in and standardized the place, so that you could find flappers in Bozeman or Albuquerque as well as in New York. Still, there was the myth of the West as a region of unlimited possibility. That was fine until the Depression and Dust Bowl proved the extent of the lie. Then came a new wave of corporate intrusion, and the government stepped in to occupy chunks of the West and to reserve them as test sites for things like atomic bombs. In consequence of all that, the place became an economic colony of the East, which fact was proved conclusively by tourism, because the natives (whatever their ethnic persuasion) were expected to put on a show for visitors with money in their pockets. Visitors, after all, cannot truly know where they are unless they see people and sights appropriate to their preconceptions.

Whence come the tourists' dreams of history? The fictions of Zane Grey (a vastly underrated writer), Louis L'Amour (a vastly overrated one), and countless others have contributed to them, as have all those motion pictures, television programs, and whatnot. Athearn understood that westerns may now be in eclipse in some media, but that the condition is temporary. "The western, as a window to frontier America, will be as exciting to future generations as it has been to those in the past," he wrote; and it will be so, because "they need it" (189).

And so they do, whether they know it or not. Americans built their mythic West more or less unconsciously; and later, they employed it to identify themselves to the world at large, so that the real and the imagined have since become as one. That sort of symbiosis is hard to ignore, historically, culturally, or socially. Now that the West is in our heads,

one supposes, we couldn't "get the hell out of Dodge" if we tried. Sometimes that may be a helpful thing. At other times, it may leave us in the hands of an unreconstructed make-believe cowboy like Ronald Reagan.

The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America is a good and useful and important book, deserving of a wider audience than it is likely to get from the constituency of a university press. It is a model of judicious scholarship and a pleasure to read. More importantly, there is nothing in the book to intimidate the nonspecialist, for whom it was probably intended in the first place.

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

WILLIAM W. SAVAGE, JR.

The New Deal and the West, by Richard Lowitt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. xx, 283 pp. Notes, map, illustrations, bibliographical note, index. \$25.00 cloth.

Few American historians are as familiar with the resources of New Deal history as Richard Lowitt, and his selection by editor Martin Ridge to write this volume in *The West in the Twentieth Century* series was fortuitous. The chairman of the department of history at Iowa State University, Lowitt has written a definitive three-volume biography of Senator George Norris of Nebraska and has edited the reports of Lorena Hickok on the Great Depression, and the journal of Nils A. Olsen. He brought to this book a keen awareness of the national political structure, the economic conditions, and the destructive forces of nature which shaped the United States and the West during the Great Depression.

In this first full-scale treatment of the impact of the New Deal on a region, Lowitt organized his study around such vital topics as agricultural programs, water use, Indian policy, regional development of electrical power, environmental issues, and conservation of the public domain. Above all is the commanding presence of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who expressed deep concern for western development even before his inauguration in March 1933. Lowitt began his study with an overview of the West as it existed in 1932. He defined the West as all of the nation beyond the first tier of states bordering the Mississippi River, and in that vast region he found a "plundered province" with its grass, soil, timber, and watersheds exploited, in some cases to depletion. Repeated droughts, plagues of insects, and dust storms brought to the "rugged individualists" of the West the realization that state and local efforts to save and revive their economies had failed. They turned to Washington for intervention to reverse the catastrophic collapse of agricultural

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